INDONESIA THE PLASTIC DEMOCRACY

WIRYO HUOJIN

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Introduction

Twenty-six years after the fall of Suharto, Indonesia still celebrates *Reformasi* as its great democratic awakening. The world hails the world's third-largest democracy, a vibrant, Muslim-majority nation where presidents now peacefully transfer power, local elections fill thousands of posts, and civil society ostensibly thrives. But beneath the gleaming surface of electoral spectacle and constitutional reform lies a more troubling reality: a democracy that bends, stretches, and appears resilient, yet never truly breaks from the old order's grip. This is not a failed democracy, nor an authoritarian reversion. It is something more insidious. It is a *plastic democracy*.

The metaphor is deliberate. Plastic is malleable, durable, and cheap to produce. It can be remoulded to serve new functions while retaining its essential

composition. Indonesia's democratic institutions, regional autonomy, direct elections, constitutional courts, Islamic parties, and special autonomy funds, have been systematically repurposed by the very forces *Reformasi* claimed to dismantle. Former generals did not disappear from politics; they exchanged command posts for gubernatorial robes. Oligarchs did not lose their licences to extract; they learned to channel village funds through family cartels while cloaking themselves in the procedural legitimacy of local budgeting. Even the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), once hailed as a puritanical reform alternative, has become a low-cost clientelism machine for timber and mining magnates, mobilising mosque networks to discipline voters rather than liberate them from rent-seeking.

Nowhere is this plasticity more visible than at the margins. In Papua, Jakarta's elites have weaponised special autonomy, the flagship democratic concession to indigenous rights, by auctioning Papuan People's Assembly seats to ex-generals and Islamist front organisations, all under the banner of counter-terrorism and religious harmony. Women's ascendance to parliamentary and ministerial posts, often celebrated as democratic deepening, frequently masks a more cynical bargain: maternal dynasties that soften

military-Islamic resource extraction with a veneer of compassionate, consensual leadership (Article 5). Even sharia-inspired bylaws, spreading across West Sumatra, South Sulawesi, and Banten, have less to do with piety than with protection rackets, illegal alcohol and vice controls operated by coalitions of ex-military district heads and local oligarchs.

The plastic democracy does not suppress opposition outright. It absorbs, redirects, and redeploys. The Constitutional Court, staffed by a rotating network of Suharto-era jurists and TNI legal alumni, has methodically weakened anti-dynasty and anti-corruption provisions while dignifying the process with legal reasoning. Civil society is not banned; it is suffocated by oligarch-funded militias, Islamic anti-separatist fronts, and criminal defamation cases drafted by military-linked legislators. Sharia cooperatives and zakat platforms, promoted as ethical finance, now bankroll palm oil and mining expansion in Eastern Indonesia, bypassing environmental reviews while mobilising grassroots support as 'Islamic economic liberation'. Media conglomerates owned by ex-military oligarchs normalise dynastic politics by alternating between anti-LGBT moral panic and nostalgic rehabilitations of New Order figures. And the great infrastructure campaigns of the Jokowi era,

celebrated as democratic deliverables, have become regional co-optation machines, reducing citizen participation to referenda on toll roads and ports that primarily benefit military-owned construction firms.

This book does not argue that Indonesia is a dictatorship in disguise. Elections matter. Civil society endures. Papuan and Acehnese activists continue to resist. But democracy's forms have become a durable shell for old extraction networks. The plastic democracy is not a betrayal of *Reformasi,* it is *Reformasi*'s most successful adaptation. To understand Indonesia's future, we must abandon the binary of democracy versus authoritarianism and instead examine how oligarchic, military, and Islamic capital have learned to thrive *within* democratic rules, reshaping them from the inside. The chapters that follow trace this anatomy of capture, from the village fund to the constitutional bench, from the mosque to the mining pit, from the governor's palace to the Papuan highlands. What emerges is a country that looks democratic, feels democratic and delivers its resources and political loyalty to a remarkably narrow, recycled elite. That is the genius of the plastic democracy. And that is the cage from which Indonesia has yet to escape.

Democracy for sale in Indonesia

Indonesia's democratic miracle was supposed to bury the ghosts of Suharto's New Order. Instead, in many corners of the archipelago, the old regime simply changed costumes.

The generals disappeared from television screens. The centralized dictatorship loosened its grip. Governors and district chiefs suddenly became elected officials instead of obedient appointees from Jakarta. Reformasi arrived in 1998 with the moral energy of a national rebirth, promising that power would finally flow downward to the people rather than upward to a palace clique.

But history has a habit of surviving inside institutions long after slogans change. Today, more than two decades after the fall of Suharto, Indonesia's regional autonomy system increasingly resembles an oligarchic franchise model. The country decentralized authority, but it never truly decentralized power. Instead, it dispersed opportunities for extraction. The beneficiaries were often the same military-linked businessmen, bureaucratic families, and provincial fixers who thrived under authoritarianism. They merely adapted faster than the reformers.

Indonesia did not eliminate the oligarchy. It localized it. This is the paradox at the heart of Reformasi. The democratic reforms that were supposed to weaken entrenched elites ended up giving them new terrain to conquer. Elections became less a mechanism for accountability than a licensing ceremony for local dynasties. Decentralization created hundreds of miniature kingdoms where political families fused public office with private wealth, all while speaking the language of democracy.

The genius of the system lies in its appearance. Indonesia still votes. Campaigns are loud. Political parties multiply like street banners before election season. Television panels celebrate participation rates.

International observers continue to praise Indonesia as Southeast Asia's democratic success story.

And yet behind the procedural pageantry sits a deeply familiar structure: patronage networks recycling state resources into family-controlled political machines.

The old Jakarta oligarchs discovered something important after Suharto fell. Centralized corruption is dangerous because everyone fights over one palace. But decentralized corruption is resilient because everyone gets a district.

Regional autonomy, particularly after the passage of sweeping decentralization laws in the early 2000s, transferred enormous authority to local governments. District heads and governors gained control over permits, land use decisions, mining licenses, procurement contracts, and budget allocations. Village funds exploded into one of the largest grassroots cash distribution systems in the world.

In theory, this was revolutionary. Local communities supposedly understood their own needs better than distant ministries in Jakarta. Villages could prioritize roads, irrigation, schools, and clinics without

begging the capital for attention. Democracy would become participatory rather than paternalistic.

But reformers made a fatal assumption: they believed institutions automatically become democratic when authority is redistributed.

They forgot that networks matter more than laws. The people best positioned to dominate decentralized Indonesia were precisely those who already possessed capital, coercive ties, and bureaucratic relationships. Former military families, politically connected businessmen, and provincial strongmen understood immediately that regional autonomy meant regional opportunity. They did not resist Reformasi. They invested in it.

Across Java and Sumatra, local elections gradually became hereditary rituals. A district chief's wife runs for office after term limits arrive. A son becomes vice mayor. A brother controls procurement. A cousin oversees party machinery. Political office transforms into an intergenerational asset portfolio.

The vocabulary changes from dictatorship to democracy, but the mechanics remain feudal. Indonesia's village fund system demonstrates this contra-

diction perfectly. On paper, the policy is admirable. Billions of rupiah flow directly into rural communities to stimulate local development and reduce inequality. In practice, however, these funds often pass through layers of patronage before reaching citizens. Village heads become brokers. Contractors become loyalists. Infrastructure projects become political advertisements.

A road is not merely a road. It is proof of allegiance. The decentralization era produced a new political archetype: the regional boss who combines the charisma of a populist, the instincts of a businessman, and the operating methods of a cartel manager. These figures present themselves as guardians of local identity against Jakarta's distant bureaucracy, yet their real genius lies in converting public budgets into political insulation.

Democracy becomes transactional. Citizens are not asked to believe in ideology. They are asked to join a network. This is why dynastic politics has spread so effectively in Indonesia. It is not simply about corruption, although corruption remains endemic. It is about predictability. Families provide continuity for patronage systems. Businesses prefer stable relationships. Bureaucrats prefer known hierarchies. Political

parties, weak and personality-driven, often become vehicles for whichever family can finance campaigns most effectively.

The result is a democracy increasingly dominated by surnames. One could argue that voters themselves enable this system. After all, Indonesians continue electing dynastic candidates. But this interpretation confuses participation with choice. In many districts, the machinery surrounding local elections is so thoroughly controlled by entrenched interests that opposition candidates struggle merely to survive politically. Access to funding, party endorsements, bureaucratic cooperation, and media visibility frequently depends on proximity to established clans.

This is not coercion in the old authoritarian sense. Nobody disappears into military prisons anymore. The modern system is subtler. It is a democracy where the playing field is tilted long before voting begins.

And unlike Suharto's centralized regime, decentralized oligarchy is remarkably difficult to dismantle. Under the New Order, power flowed vertically from Jakarta. Today, it sprawls horizontally through thousands of local arrangements. Reformers face not one entrenched elite but hundreds.

Even anti-corruption efforts reveal the depth of the problem. Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission once symbolized the country's democratic promise, aggressively targeting governors, mayors, legislators, and bureaucrats. Yet every arrest seemed to expose not isolated misconduct but systemic behaviour. District chiefs treated public office as an investment vehicle because elections themselves had become prohibitively expensive.

Campaigns cost fortunes. Fortunes require sponsors. Sponsors demand returns. The logic is almost mathematical. A local politician spends heavily to secure office, using financiers tied to construction firms, plantation interests, mining operations, or business conglomerates. Once elected, the politician rewards allies through contracts, permits, and budget access. Family members inherit the network. Elections repeat the cycle while maintaining the appearance of democratic legitimacy.

Indonesia's oligarchs learned an important lesson from 1998: naked authoritarianism attracts resistance. Democratic language does not. So the post-Suharto elite mastered the art of procedural democracy while neutralizing its substance. Elections occur regularly. Critics speak freely compared with the dicta-

torship era. Social media buzzes with activism. Yet material power often remains concentrated in astonishingly narrow circles.

This helps explain why decentralization sometimes deepened inequality instead of reducing it. Wealthy districts accumulated leverage while poorer regions remained dependent on local patrons. Resource-rich provinces became battlegrounds for extraction networks. Environmental destruction accelerated because licensing authority moved closer to local elites eager for revenue and campaign financing.

Palm oil concessions, mining permits, logging rights, all became currencies within decentralized patronage systems. The irony is brutal. Reformasi sought to dismantle centralized exploitation, but decentralization often multiplied extraction points.

Indonesia's democratic defenders frequently argue that despite its flaws, the system remains vastly preferable to dictatorship. They are correct. Nobody serious wishes for a return to Suharto's repression. Indonesia today enjoys far greater freedom, openness, and civic participation than during the New Order.

But acknowledging progress should not require ro-

manticizing reality. The danger is not that Indonesia will suddenly revert to classic authoritarianism. The danger is more sophisticated: a permanently managed democracy where elections exist primarily to legitimize entrenched oligarchic arrangements. A state where political competition survives, but mostly among rival elite networks rather than transformative alternatives.

This phenomenon is hardly unique to Indonesia. Democracies around the world increasingly resemble marketplaces where wealth purchases institutional durability. But Indonesia's case is particularly revealing because decentralization was once celebrated globally as a democratic cure-all. International institutions praised regional autonomy as evidence of political modernization. Development experts admired village fund programs as models of participatory governance.

Too few asked who would actually control the machinery once power dispersed. The answer, increasingly, was whoever already possessed organizational muscle. Former New Order figures and their descendants understood something reformers underestimated: institutions do not erase old power struc-

tures. They become inhabited by them. The oligarchs did not defeat decentralization. They colonized it.

And yet Indonesia's story is not entirely cynical. The same decentralized landscape that empowers dynasties also creates pockets of resistance. Some local leaders genuinely innovate. Civil society groups continue exposing corruption. Investigative journalists remain among the country's most stubborn democratic actors. Younger Indonesians increasingly express frustration with dynastic politics and transactional governance.

There are cracks in the system. But meaningful reform requires abandoning comforting illusions about what decentralization automatically achieves. Local governance is not inherently democratic simply because it is local. Power can suffocate accountability just as effectively in a district office as in a presidential palace.

Indonesia's post-Suharto era should therefore force a broader reconsideration of democratic theory itself. Too often, democracy promotion focuses obsessively on procedures: elections, decentralization, term limits, administrative restructuring. These mechanisms matter, but they are not magic. If economic power, patronage networks, and political financing remain

concentrated, democratic reforms can become delivery systems for elite adaptation.

The oligarchs evolve faster than the institutions designed to restrain them. That may be the defining political lesson of contemporary Indonesia. The fall of a dictator does not necessarily dismantle a ruling class. Sometimes it merely teaches that ruling class new survival strategies.

Suharto's inner circle understood this better than the reformers who celebrated decentralization as liberation. They recognized that the future would belong not to those who resisted democracy outright, but to those who learned how to operate inside it while preserving old hierarchies beneath fresh rhetoric. And so Indonesia entered the democratic age not by escaping oligarchy, but by franchising it.

The new uniforms of power

Indonesia was supposed to have buried the political military with Suharto. That was the promise after 1998. Reformasi would dismantle the old "dual function" doctrine, the poisonous idea that the armed forces had not only the right to defend the nation but also the duty to govern it. Barracks would return to the barracks. Civilian democracy would mature. Governors would stop behaving like regional commanders. Parliament would stop resembling a security briefing room.

And yet, a quarter century later, the uniforms never truly disappeared. They simply changed fabric. Today's military influence in Indonesia does not march

through Jakarta with tanks. It smiles from campaign posters. It cuts ribbons at infrastructure projects. It sits inside provincial offices wearing batik instead of camouflage. The generals of the New Order era have been replaced by a more sophisticated species: retired officers, political brokers, security consultants and "nationalist technocrats" who dominate regional politics without ever declaring martial law.

Indonesia did not eliminate military power from civilian governance. It privatized it, decentralized it and normalized it. The result is a quieter but perhaps more enduring form of elite capture.

Look at the pattern across Indonesia's provinces. West Java, North Sumatra, Papua and dozens of strategic districts have repeatedly elevated former military officers into gubernatorial seats, regency leaderships and legislative command positions. Some arrived through elections. Others through party patronage. Many wrapped themselves in the language of order, stability and development. In a country where democratic institutions are often weak and political parties function more like rental vehicles than ideological organizations, ex-military figures possess what civilians frequently lack: hierarchy, discipline, networks and access to coercive relationships.

This is not accidental. It is structural. The 2004 TNI Law, celebrated at the time as a democratic milestone, contained within it the seeds of today's ambiguity. The law formally removed the military from direct politics. Active-duty officers were theoretically prohibited from holding civilian office. The armed forces were rebranded as professional defenders of national sovereignty rather than political guardians of the republic.

But the law left loopholes large enough to drive armored personnel carriers through. Territorial commands remained intact. Informal influence networks survived untouched. Active officers continued to coordinate extensively with local governments through "security partnerships," intelligence sharing and crisis management frameworks. Retired officers faced virtually no cultural barriers when entering politics because Indonesia had never fully delegitimized military political authority in the first place.

That distinction matters enormously. In countries where authoritarian rule collapses decisively, military involvement in politics becomes politically toxic. In Indonesia, it merely became electorally adaptable.

The post-Suharto state condemned dictatorship without fully dismantling the mythology behind it.

Indonesians were taught to reject authoritarian excesses but still admire the military as the ultimate stabilizing institution. Democracy was accepted cautiously, almost conditionally, tolerated so long as it produced order.

That conditionality explains why ex-generals continue to thrive politically. Civilian politicians in Indonesia often appear fragmented, transactional and ideologically hollow. Former military officers, by contrast, project decisiveness. They speak the language of command in a political culture exhausted by corruption scandals and bureaucratic paralysis. Many voters do not necessarily want authoritarianism back. They simply associate military figures with competence, discipline and national unity.

This is how democratic erosion now works in many countries. Not through coups, but through nostalgia management. The old strongmen no longer need to overthrow elections. They just need to win them.

Consider how regional governance increasingly mirrors security architecture. Provincial administrations frequently operate through centralized chains of loyalty revolving around governors with military backgrounds. Local legislatures become less like deliberative democratic institutions and more like

ceremonial approval chambers orbiting executive authority. Civilian bureaucrats learn quickly that advancement depends less on policy innovation than on personal allegiance.

In some regions, especially conflict-sensitive areas like Papua, the overlap between civilian administration and security logic becomes almost impossible to separate. Development policy merges with counterinsurgency strategy. Infrastructure becomes a political pacification tool. Public dissent is interpreted through the lens of stability threats rather than democratic expression.

Officially, this is still civilian governance. Functionally, however, many regional systems behave like shadow command posts. That phrase may sound dramatic, but the mechanics are visible everywhere. Retired officers occupy governorships while maintaining extensive informal ties to active commanders. Local business elites align themselves with military-linked patronage networks. Police, bureaucrats and political parties coordinate through opaque security relationships invisible to formal democratic oversight.

Nobody needs to suspend the constitution because the real authority often exists outside constitution-

al structures altogether. Indonesia's democracy survives procedurally while weakening substantively. The tragedy is that this evolution is often celebrated as democratic maturity rather than recognized as institutional camouflage.

After all, these leaders are elected. Ballots are counted. Campaigns occur. Political parties compete. International observers see peaceful transfers of power and conclude that Indonesia has become one of Southeast Asia's democratic success stories.

Technically, they are not wrong. But democracy is not merely the existence of elections. It is the distribution of power underneath them. And underneath Indonesia's electoral system lies an entrenched security aristocracy that never fully relinquished its governing instincts.

The post-Suharto bargain essentially worked like this: the military would surrender overt control of national politics in exchange for preserving its territorial infrastructure, economic relationships and social legitimacy. Civilian elites accepted the arrangement because dismantling the military completely would have risked instability. International partners accepted it because gradual democratization appeared preferable to institutional collapse.

Short-term pragmatism became long-term entrenchment. Now the consequences are maturing. Indonesia's regional politics increasingly resemble a hybrid system where democratic rituals coexist with informal militarized influence. Governors behave like electoral commanders. Legislatures behave like coordination councils. Political parties function as coalition vehicles for elite security networks rather than genuine ideological organizations.

Even the language of governance reflects this shift. Regional leaders constantly invoke "stability," "national resilience" and "security harmony" terms that sound administrative but carry unmistakably military DNA. Political opposition is not always crushed directly; it is managed, monitored and bureaucratically exhausted.

The genius of this system is its deniability. No tanks patrol Jakarta. No colonels announce emergency rule on national television. Indonesia can therefore insist, with considerable justification, that it remains democratic.

But the absence of dictatorship is not the same thing as civilian supremacy. What Indonesia has constructed instead is a post-authoritarian fusion

state where military influence survives through informal penetration rather than formal domination. The uniforms disappeared from parliament only to reappear inside political parties, provincial administrations and economic patronage networks.

In many ways, this model is more resilient than Suharto's original system. Old authoritarian regimes depended heavily on visible coercion. Visible coercion creates resistance. Modern elite capture is subtler. It embeds itself inside democratic procedures. It speaks the language of reform while preserving old power relationships underneath.

That subtlety makes it harder to confront because many Indonesians understandably see no immediate crisis. The economy grows. Elections happen. Infrastructure expands. Compared with the chaos of the late 1990s, the current system appears functional.

And functionality is politically seductive. But democracies rarely decay through sudden catastrophe anymore. They erode through normalization. Citizens gradually accept concentrations of power because those concentrations arrive wrapped in promises of efficiency, patriotism and development.

Indonesia's military-political class understands this perfectly. The contemporary ex-general does not campaign as a dictator. He campaigns as a manager. He presents himself as the adult in the room, the disciplined nationalist above partisan dysfunction. He offers technocratic authority with a paternal smile. Voters weary of corruption and polarization often find the bargain appealing.

Yet every time democratic culture places salvation in strongmen rather than institutions, civilian governance weakens a little more.

The danger is not that Indonesia will suddenly revert to Suharto-style authoritarianism. History rarely repeats itself so mechanically. The danger is that Indonesia may gradually institutionalize a permanent democratic gray zone where civilian authority exists formally but remains psychologically subordinate to military prestige and security logic.

That kind of system can survive for decades. Indeed, many states around the world already function this way: electoral on paper, oligarchic in practice and securitized beneath the surface. Indonesia is hardly unique. But its scale and geopolitical importance make the trajectory especially significant.

This matters not only for Indonesians but for the broader democratic narrative in Asia. For years, Indonesia has been presented internationally as proof that Muslim-majority societies can democratize successfully after dictatorship. There is truth in that story. Indonesia deserves recognition for avoiding the catastrophic reversals that consumed other post-authoritarian states.

But democratic transitions should not be romanticized merely because they avoid collapse. The deeper question is whether power truly changes hands or simply changes costume. In Indonesia's case, too much of the old security order survived intact beneath the reformist surface. Reformasi removed the military from center stage without fully dismantling the theater itself. The actors evolved. The script adapted. The command mentality endured.

And perhaps that was inevitable. States shaped by decades of military political dominance rarely develop robust civilian institutions overnight. Habits of authority persist across generations. Bureaucracies learn obedience faster than independence. Citizens accustomed to paternal governance often equate firmness with competence.

Still, inevitability should not become absolution. Indonesia's democratic future depends on whether civilian institutions can eventually mature beyond reliance on military-derived authority. That means stronger political parties, independent regional legislatures, transparent campaign financing and a civic culture willing to challenge the mythology of the benevolent strongman.

Most importantly, it requires recognizing that military influence does not need uniforms to remain powerful. The generals understood this long before the civilians did. That is why they traded boots for ballots. And why, decades after Suharto fell, the architecture of command still quietly governs much of Indonesia's democracy.

Prayer rugs and palm oil

There is a particular irony in the modern political history of Indonesia's Prosperous Justice Party, better known as PKS. A party born from campus piety circles, disciplined Qur'anic study groups and moral reform campaigns has, over time, become deeply entangled with the very oligarchic structures it once implied it would cleanse. The movement that promised ethical politics now often functions as one more broker inside Indonesia's sprawling machinery of extraction.

And perhaps that should not surprise anyone. Political idealism, especially religious idealism, rarely survives first contact with decentralized power and money. Indonesia's democracy does not reward purity. It rewards networks. It rewards financing. It

rewards those capable of mobilizing bodies at scale while simultaneously reassuring economic elites that profits will remain untouched. PKS learned this lesson earlier than many of its admirers would like to admit.

What makes PKS fascinating is not hypocrisy alone. Hypocrisy is common in politics. The more interesting story is structural. PKS represents a distinctly modern phenomenon: Islamist organizational discipline repurposed into an efficient delivery mechanism for oligarchic capitalism.

The contradiction is not accidental. It is functional. In provinces like Riau, Central Kalimantan and Papua, the logic becomes especially visible. Timber concessions, mining operations and plantation expansion require more than licenses from Jakarta. They require social management. They require local legitimacy. They require communities that can be persuaded, fragmented, pacified or morally redirected while land changes hands and forests disappear.

This is where PKS becomes useful. The party's strength has never rested primarily on charismatic populism. Unlike flamboyant nationalist machines built around personalities, PKS operates through cadres. The model resembles a missionary bureau-

cracy. Small religious study circles cultivate obedience, loyalty and ideological cohesion. Volunteers are trained to organize neighbourhoods, distribute charity, conduct welfare outreach and sustain long-term relationships with communities. In electoral politics, this creates an extraordinarily cheap mobilization apparatus.

Cheap matters. Most Indonesian political parties are financially ravenous because they depend on transactional patronage. Money must constantly flow downward to local brokers who distribute cash, gifts and favors. PKS partially solved this problem through moral infrastructure. A mosque network can do what cash often cannot. It creates social obligation. It builds emotional trust. It turns political support into a form of communal righteousness.

In practice, that means lower mobilization costs. The neighborhood preacher, the Qur'an teacher, the Islamic charity volunteer and the party cadre begin to overlap. Politics becomes embedded inside everyday religious life. A voter no longer experiences support for PKS merely as a political preference but as an extension of moral belonging.

For oligarchs, this is incredibly attractive. A plantation tycoon does not necessarily need ideological

allies. He needs stability. He needs permits processed quietly. He needs labour unrest minimized. He needs village opposition softened. He needs elections managed predictably. PKS offers something valuable: disciplined intermediaries who can moralize social order while avoiding the vulgarity of open gangster politics.

Indonesia's extractive frontier economies have always depended on middlemen. Under Suharto, these middlemen were military officers, Golkar operatives and bureaucratic fixers. In democratic Indonesia, the intermediaries diversified. NGOs emerged. Ethnic brokers emerged. Religious networks emerged. PKS adapted itself into one of the most sophisticated of these brokerage systems.

Consider Riau, where palm oil expansion transformed vast landscapes into profitable monocultures. Environmental devastation alone does not explain the political durability of the plantation economy. Such systems persist because social resistance is managed carefully. Local elites are incorporated. Religious legitimacy is cultivated. Community leaders are persuaded that economic expansion represents not exploitation but development and stability.

PKS cadres proved particularly effective in these environments because they projected personal austerity. They looked clean compared with the cartoonishly corrupt political class surrounding them. That image created trust among urban middle classes and rural religious communities alike. But clean image politics can coexist quite comfortably with structurally dirty economic arrangements.

That is the paradox outsiders often misunderstand. Corruption in Indonesia is not merely envelopes stuffed with cash. It is alliance architecture. It is the mutual accommodation between moral legitimacy and economic power. A politician does not need to personally steal from a concession project to become indispensable to the system sustaining it.

Indeed, the genius of PKS lies precisely in how it avoids appearing like a traditional oligarchic party even while facilitating oligarchic outcomes.

Its leaders speak the language of Islamic ethics, family values and anti-corruption reform. Meanwhile, the broader political coalitions they inhabit frequently align with industries driving deforestation, indigenous displacement and ecological collapse. The contradiction rarely explodes because ide-

ological framing redirects attention toward personal morality rather than structural inequality.

This is one reason Islamist politics often coexists so comfortably with neoliberal economics across many countries. Moral conservatism can actually stabilize market expansion. Public debates become consumed by questions of virtue, modesty and religious identity while ownership structures remain largely untouched.

PKS did not invent this formula. It localized it brilliantly. In Central Kalimantan, where mining and plantations reshape both indigenous livelihoods and ecological systems, political organization requires constant negotiation with local identities. Here, PKS's disciplined social outreach becomes strategically valuable. Religious welfare programs can soften distrust toward outside capital. Cadres embedded in communities can mediate tensions before they escalate into organized resistance.

Again, this is not necessarily conspiracy. It is convergence. Resource oligarchs and Islamist networks discover they need one another. One side possesses money and access to state institutions. The other possesses grassroots penetration and moral authori-

ty. Together, they create a remarkably resilient political machine.

Papua reveals the darker implications of this arrangement. Few regions expose the brutal edges of Indonesia's developmental model more clearly than Papua. Extraction there is inseparable from militarization, demographic transformation and deep indigenous alienation. Yet even in such contested terrain, religious organizations become useful instruments of incorporation. Islamic charity networks, educational programs and social outreach can operate as soft-power extensions of broader state and corporate interests.

The language is always benevolent. Development. Stability. Welfare. Modernization. But beneath these abstractions lies a harder reality: land must be made governable before it can be profitably extracted. PKS's appeal to disciplined Islamic solidarity helps produce precisely that governability. There is a temptation among some liberal observers to view Islamist parties as fundamentally anti-capitalist or anti-elite because they criticize Westernization and moral decadence. But moral conservatism does not inherently threaten oligarchy. Often it protects it. Religious discipline can depoliticize economic grievances by re-

framing suffering as spiritual endurance rather than political exploitation.

Mosque-based mobilization is especially effective because it operates continuously, not merely during election seasons. The mosque does what political headquarters cannot: it organizes routine social life. It distributes charity during hardship. It creates marriage networks. It shapes moral identity from childhood onward. That produces loyalty far deeper than ordinary patronage.

From the perspective of resource capitalism, this is extraordinarily efficient. Why spend enormous sums constructing coercive local machines when religious networks already provide social coordination at minimal cost? Indonesia's oligarchs understand this perfectly well. They are ideological pragmatists. One year they support nationalist politicians. Another year they support Islamic conservatives. Their real loyalty is to continuity of accumulation. Whoever can secure the terrain becomes useful.

PKS became useful because it professionalized piety. This is what distinguishes it from more chaotic Islamist movements. PKS cadres are organized. They arrive on time. They conduct surveys. They build

databases. They operate disaster relief efforts. They speak the language of technocratic governance while maintaining religious credibility. In many ways, they resemble management consultants with prayer schedules.

That combination reassures both middle-class voters and business elites. Yet the tragedy is not merely ideological compromise. It is the gradual narrowing of political imagination. Many Indonesians who once hoped political Islam might challenge entrenched oligarchic domination instead witnessed its accommodation into the system. Ethical rhetoric survived, but redistribution rarely followed. Structural reform faded into managerial moralism.

The forests kept disappearing. The mines kept expanding. The plantations kept growing. Meanwhile, political discourse often revolved around symbolic moral controversies far removed from the economic architecture transforming Indonesia's outer islands.

This dynamic reflects a broader truth about contemporary democracy. Electoral systems frequently absorb reformist movements by converting them into governance partners for capital accumulation. Success requires financing. Financing requires alli-

ances. Alliances require compromise. Over time, organizational survival overtakes ideological transformation.

PKS is not unique in this regard. It is simply unusually disciplined and therefore unusually effective.

Its cadres likely justify these compromises pragmatically. Participation inside power structures, they might argue, allows gradual influence. Better to negotiate than remain permanently marginal. Better to secure incremental gains than achieve nothing.

And perhaps there is some truth to that. But political systems should ultimately be judged not by intentions but by outcomes. In resource-rich provinces across Indonesia, the outcomes remain stark: environmental destruction, indigenous displacement, concentrated wealth and enduring oligarchic influence over democratic institutions.

The mosque did not replace the oligarch. It became one more road leading toward him. That reality unsettles simplistic assumptions on both the secular left and the religious right. Secular liberals often imagine Islamic parties as inherently hostile to capitalism. Religious conservatives often imagine piety naturally

produces justice. Indonesia demonstrates something more complicated and more uncomfortable: disciplined religiosity can coexist quite peacefully with extractive inequality.

Sometimes it even lubricates it. The deeper lesson here concerns modern power itself. Oligarchy today rarely governs through naked coercion alone. It governs through partnerships with institutions capable of manufacturing consent, identity and moral legitimacy. Religious networks, media ecosystems, NGOs and digital communities all become potential instruments within larger economic systems.

PKS succeeded because it mastered this terrain better than many competitors. Its real innovation was not theological. It was organizational. It converted faith into scalable political infrastructure. And once such infrastructure exists, it inevitably attracts those seeking profitable stability.

In another era, the village strongman or military commander performed this role. Today, a smiling cadre distributing food aid after Friday prayers may accomplish it more effectively.

That is the true paradox of PKS. Not that an Islamist party compromised with oligarchs. Nearly all

parties eventually compromise with power. The real paradox is that moral discipline itself became economically valuable to extraction politics. Piety became logistics. Religious solidarity became political technology. And reformist idealism became, in many places, the velvet glove covering the hard machinery of resource accumulation.

Papua's silver bullets

Jakarta has perfected a peculiar political art form in Papua: taking the language of liberation and turning it into an instrument of management. Special autonomy, once presented as the grand democratic answer to Papuan grievances, has increasingly become something else entirely, a velvet mechanism for elite extraction, disguised as reconciliation. The tragedy is not merely that the system fails Papuans. It is that it succeeds brilliantly for everyone else.

Indonesia's ruling establishment likes to frame Papua as a security problem interrupted occasionally by development challenges. That framing is convenient because it allows the state to merge military power,

religious messaging and oligarchic business interests into one seamless architecture. The result is a model where autonomy exists mostly as theater while real authority remains concentrated in Jakarta-connected networks of retired generals, politically connected businessmen and carefully cultivated civil society intermediaries.

The silver bullets are not literal. They are bureaucratic. Budgetary. Institutional. They are delivered through special autonomy funds, security programs, religious initiatives and carefully managed democratic bodies like the Papuan People's Assembly, or MRP. In theory, these institutions were designed to empower indigenous Papuans after decades of marginalization. In practice, they increasingly function as political shock absorbers for the Indonesian state.

That is the genius of the system. It does not openly crush Papuan aspirations in the old Suharto style. It domesticates them.

When Papua's special autonomy framework was introduced in 2001, many observers believed Jakarta had finally understood that military repression alone could not stabilize the region. The law promised recognition of indigenous rights, greater revenue shar-

ing and local political participation. It was sold as a democratic breakthrough. But two decades later, Papua remains poorer, more militarized and more politically fragmented than ever.

Why? Because autonomy was never allowed to evolve into genuine self-governance. It was transformed into a patronage economy.

The MRP, originally envisioned as a cultural guardian representing indigenous Papuans, became vulnerable almost immediately to co-optation. Seats meant to amplify authentic Papuan voices gradually turned into prizes distributed through elite negotiations shaped far from Jayapura. Religious leaders, customary figures and women's representatives were not always chosen because they represented grassroots legitimacy, but because they were considered manageable.

Manageability is the core political currency in Papua. Jakarta does not necessarily require loyalty. It requires predictability. The modern Indonesian state learned from East Timor that overt brutality can create international embarrassment. Papua therefore demanded a subtler strategy: selective inclusion. Allow Papuan institutions to exist. Celebrate them publicly.

Fund them generously. Then ensure that the people controlling access to those funds remain dependent on Jakarta's approval.

This is where the oligarchic machinery enters the story. Special autonomy funds, billions upon billions of rupiah, were supposed to transform healthcare, education and infrastructure. Some projects did emerge. Roads were built. Government offices multiplied. Yet much of the money disappeared into opaque contracting systems dominated by politically connected actors, many with deep ties to security elites.

The beneficiaries were often not isolated corrupt individuals but entire interconnected ecosystems. Retired military figures became business brokers. Jakarta consultants became "development advisers." Religious foundations emerged as intermediaries for peace-building initiatives. Local elites received slices of the pie in exchange for political alignment. Everyone gained a stake in preserving the system exactly as it was.

Meanwhile ordinary Papuans kept receiving speeches about empowerment. One of the most remarkable achievements of this architecture is how it

transformed dissent itself into an administrative category. Resistance could now be divided into "acceptable" and "extremist" forms. The acceptable voices were invited into state-funded dialogues, NGO conferences and religious harmony campaigns. The unacceptable voices were securitized, criminalized or associated with separatist violence.

This is where the counter-terrorism narrative became politically invaluable. After the global war on terror reshaped international politics, Indonesian authorities found a flexible new vocabulary for Papua. Armed resistance groups could be framed not merely as separatists but as destabilizing extremist threats. The distinction matters enormously because counter-terrorism carries international legitimacy in ways anti-separatist campaigns do not.

Once security language dominates political discourse, extraordinary state measures suddenly appear reasonable. Military expansion becomes protection. Surveillance becomes stability. Political filtering becomes moderation. And autonomy itself becomes conditional on obedience.

The role of Islamist civil society organizations inside this ecosystem is particularly revealing. Indone-

sia officially promotes religious harmony in Papua, often portraying Muslim organizations as bridges between communities. Sometimes they genuinely are. But in many cases these organizations also operate as soft-power extensions of Jakarta's broader political agenda.

That agenda is not necessarily overt Islamization. It is integration. Religious outreach programs, interfaith initiatives and humanitarian campaigns frequently overlap with demographic and political shifts that dilute indigenous Papuan influence. Migration patterns have already transformed urban Papua, where non-Papuan populations dominate many commercial sectors. Religious institutions can unintentionally and sometimes intentionally, reinforce these structural changes by embedding Jakarta-aligned narratives within local civic life.

The state understands something crucial: guns alone cannot sustain control indefinitely. Legitimacy must be manufactured socially. So Papua receives a carefully curated ideological package. National unity is framed as religious coexistence. Criticism of Jakarta becomes associated with instability. Indigenous nationalism is subtly recast as dangerous ethnic ex-

clusivism. Military-backed development projects are marketed as humanitarian modernization.

The language is always compassionate. The power structure underneath rarely is. This creates a particularly cruel irony. Institutions established to protect Papuan identity increasingly function as instruments that neutralize it. The MRP's symbolic authority helps legitimize policies it often cannot meaningfully shape. Local elites become defenders of a system that weakens local agency. Critics are isolated not only by Jakarta but sometimes by fellow Papuans whose livelihoods now depend on autonomy patronage networks.

Fragmentation becomes self-sustaining. And fragmentation is politically useful. A united Papua with coherent leadership would be difficult to manage. A fragmented Papua filled with competing elites, rival clans, security dependencies and donor-funded intermediaries is far easier to contain. Jakarta does not need universal support. It merely needs sufficient division to prevent a consolidated challenge.

This pattern reflects a broader feature of modern Indonesian democracy. The country did democratize after Suharto, but democratization did not dismantle

oligarchic power. It redistributed it. Elections coexist comfortably with entrenched patronage systems. Civilian institutions often operate alongside informal military influence. Decentralization sometimes empowers local democracy, but it can also multiply opportunities for elite capture.

Papua represents the most extreme version of this contradiction. Indonesia tells the world that Papua enjoys special autonomy and democratic participation. Technically, this is true. There are elections. There are assemblies. There are budgets. There are dialogues.

But democracy without meaningful power redistribution becomes ceremonial. And ceremonies can be manipulated. The international community has often been strangely eager to accept Jakarta's framing. Partly this reflects Indonesia's geopolitical importance. Partly it reflects fatigue. Papua is complicated, distant and difficult to access. Foreign journalists face restrictions. Independent monitoring remains limited. Indonesian officials present development statistics while diplomats prefer stability over confrontation.

The result is a dangerous illusion of progress. Yet beneath the official optimism lies a growing reservoir

of disillusionment. Many Papuans increasingly view special autonomy not as liberation but as managed dependency. Younger generations see elites enriched while basic social inequalities persist. They watch security operations expand alongside speeches about peace. They observe autonomy funds flowing while indigenous political leverage weakens.

And they notice who keeps getting richer. This frustration cannot simply be explained away as separatist propaganda. It reflects structural contradictions embedded within the autonomy model itself. A system designed to empower indigenous communities cannot succeed when its financial arteries are controlled by external patronage networks. Institutions meant to represent Papuans cannot remain credible if they are perceived as extensions of Jakarta's management strategy.

Legitimacy cannot be permanently subcontracted. Indonesia still has a choice, though perhaps not for much longer. Genuine autonomy would require surrendering some degree of centralized political control, something Jakarta's security establishment deeply distrusts. It would require transparency around autonomy funds, independent oversight and protection for authentic political dissent. It would

also require recognizing that indigenous Papuan grievances are not simply developmental but political and historical.

That conversation remains largely taboo. Instead, Jakarta prefers calibrated containment. More security. More infrastructure. More elite partnerships. More symbolic inclusion. More carefully managed dialogue. The assumption appears to be that enough money and enough administrative engineering can indefinitely postpone deeper reckoning.

History suggests otherwise. States often mistake temporary manageability for permanent stability. Patronage systems can suppress unrest for years while quietly eroding legitimacy underneath. Eventually the gap between official narratives and lived realities becomes too large to conceal. When that happens, institutions designed to absorb frustration can suddenly become amplifiers of it.

Papua may already be approaching that threshold. The most unsettling aspect of the current model is not merely corruption or militarization. It is the normalization of political cynicism. Entire generations are learning that democratic institutions exist primarily as transactional arenas rather than vehicles for rep-

resentation. They see assemblies negotiated behind closed doors. They see religious language fused with state interests. They see autonomy converted into a marketplace for influence.

And they learn the lesson every oligarchic system ultimately teaches: power matters more than principle. Indonesia deserves credit for avoiding some of the catastrophic brutality that marked earlier periods of Papuan policy. But replacing overt authoritarianism with sophisticated co-optation is not the same thing as justice. A softer mechanism of control remains a mechanism of control.

Papua's silver bullets are effective precisely because they rarely look violent. They arrive as grants, appointments, dialogues, partnerships and harmony campaigns. They speak the language of democracy while hollowing out its substance.

That is what makes them so dangerous. Empires rarely survive on force alone. The durable ones master the art of convincing the periphery that dependence is participation. Jakarta's Papua strategy increasingly resembles that formula: a system where indigenous representation exists, but within carefully managed boundaries; where autonomy functions, but only

under supervision; where local elites prosper, but largely as junior partners in a hierarchy whose center remains elsewhere. The tragedy is not simply that Papua's autonomy has been compromised. It is that compromise itself has become institutionalized.

The velvet matriarchs of Indonesia's democratic illusion

Indonesia likes to tell itself a comforting story about democracy. The generals are no longer openly in charge. The dictatorship is gone. Elections are loud, colourful and endlessly televised. Women now occupy gubernatorial mansions, parliamentary chairs and cabinet tables once monopolized by stern-faced men in military uniforms. It is presented as progress, evidence that the republic has matured beyond the brutal architecture of the Suharto era.

But Indonesian politics has always excelled at costume changes. The most successful disguise of post-authoritarian Indonesia may well be the rise of

the political matriarch: the president's daughter, the dead bupati's widow, the retired general's wife, the oligarch's niece. Their ascent is celebrated domestically and internationally as proof that democracy has softened the old masculine order. Yet beneath the image of maternal authority lies a harder truth. These women often function less as political revolutionaries than as dynastic custodians, preserving the interests of military networks, business cartels and conservative Islamic brokers under a more electable face.

Indonesia did not dismantle oligarchy after Suharto. It simply taught oligarchy to wear kebaya. The genius of dynastic female leadership in Indonesia is that it neutralizes criticism before it begins. A widow entering politics after her husband's corruption scandal appears sympathetic rather than predatory. A daughter inheriting a regional machine is framed as continuity, even devotion to public service. Female authority arrives wrapped in emotional legitimacy: sacrifice, motherhood, family duty, national healing. The symbolism is disarming.

Megawati Sukarnoputri perfected this formula. Her political identity was never merely ideological. It was genealogical. She was the daughter of Sukarno,

the republic's founding patriarch, and that bloodline became a political religion. Her rise was treated not simply as democratic competition but as historical restoration. Indonesians projected onto her a maternal aura, calm, patient, protective, especially after the violent instability that followed Suharto's collapse.

Yet Megawati's presidency hardly represented a clean rupture from the New Order establishment. Former military figures remained influential. Oligarchic interests adapted comfortably. Political reform proceeded cautiously, selectively. The machinery changed operators without changing its wiring.

This became the template for Indonesia's post-authoritarian democracy: emotional legitimacy on the surface, transactional continuity underneath. Nowhere is this clearer than in regional politics, especially in East Java, where dynastic succession has become practically institutionalized. The death, imprisonment or retirement of a male political boss frequently produces not democratic renewal but hereditary transfer. Wives become regents. Daughters inherit campaign structures. Sisters occupy parliamentary seats while brothers manage procurement contracts from behind the curtain.

The language surrounding these women is revealing. They are praised as "motherly," "close to the people," "humble" and "religious." Indonesian political culture treats femininity as a moral cleansing agent. A woman entering office is presumed to soften corruption, violence or authoritarian instincts simply by virtue of gender presentation.

But power is not purified by lipstick. Many of these dynastic administrations continue the same patronage systems that enriched local elites during the New Order. Infrastructure contracts circulate among loyalists. Mining concessions remain concentrated. Local bureaucracies become family ecosystems. Elections become elaborate rituals confirming what has already been privately negotiated among businessmen, military intermediaries and religious authorities.

The woman at the center of the machine often functions as its public conscience rather than its architect. That distinction is politically useful. She absorbs public affection while harder actors operate with reduced scrutiny.

Western observers frequently misread this phenomenon because they apply liberal assumptions about female leadership to deeply illiberal struc-

tures. They see more women in office and conclude that democratization is progressing. But descriptive representation is not the same thing as structural transformation. A woman can inherit an authoritarian machine without dismantling it. In fact, she may stabilize it more effectively precisely because she appears less threatening.

Indonesia's oligarchs understand optics better than most democracies. A female politician invoking Islamic modesty, family values and maternal compassion can simultaneously support deeply conservative religious regulations without appearing overtly coercive. This has become one of the defining paradoxes of modern Indonesia: women politicians helping legitimize increasingly restrictive moral governance.

In many districts, female leaders have endorsed or tolerated regulations policing dress codes, alcohol consumption, public morality and religious behaviour. The justification is almost always cultural harmony or community virtue. Yet these policies often emerge from bargains between local political dynasties and conservative Islamic organizations whose electoral mobilization is indispensable.

This arrangement benefits both sides. Dynastic elites receive religious legitimacy and protection

from populist Islamist attacks. Conservative clerics gain policy influence and moral authority over local governance. Meanwhile, the language of female leadership softens international criticism. Restrictions appear less like patriarchal impositions and more like consensual cultural expressions.

The result is a uniquely Indonesian synthesis: oligarchic democracy wrapped in maternal symbolism and sanctified by selective religiosity. One reason this system persists is because Indonesia's democracy remains intensely personalistic. Institutions are weak; surnames are strong. Voters often trust family continuity more than abstract party platforms. Political parties themselves are notoriously hollow, functioning less as ideological organizations than as rental vehicles for elite coalitions. In such a landscape, dynasties offer familiarity and access.

Women become essential to this continuity because they can preserve family brands during moments of crisis. A disgraced husband may be unelectable after a corruption investigation, but his wife can campaign as the wronged caretaker of his legacy. A deceased regional boss can effectively govern from the grave through his widow. The dynasty survives because the

public emotionally distinguishes between the family's image and the machinery surrounding it.

Indonesia is hardly unique in this regard. South Asia has long produced female leaders emerging from male political bloodlines, from Benazir Bhutto to Indira Gandhi to Sheikh Hasina. But Indonesia's version carries a distinct post-authoritarian flavour. The women who rise are not merely inheritors of charisma. They are stabilizers of a democratic order that remains deeply shaped by military, corporate and religious bargaining.

That is why discussions of women's empowerment in Indonesian politics often feel strangely hollow. The numbers improve. The symbolism expands. Yet the underlying distribution of power changes little.

Real democratic transformation would threaten entrenched interests. Much of Indonesia's female dynastic politics protects them. Even the rhetoric of maternal leadership can become politically manipulative. The state increasingly presents itself not as an impersonal institution accountable to citizens but as a familial structure demanding obedience. Leaders speak as protective parents. Citizens are treated as children requiring guidance. Dissent becomes disrespect rather than democratic participation.

This maternal framing is politically brilliant because it converts hierarchy into intimacy. Authoritarianism traditionally relies on fear. Indonesia's softer oligarchy relies on affection. And affection is harder to rebel against.

The danger is not that women hold power. The danger is assuming that female leadership automatically democratizes power. Gender alone cannot redeem corrupt systems. A political dynasty led by a woman may still suppress competition, monopolize resources and reinforce illiberal coalitions. Representation matters, but representation without redistribution merely decorates inequality.

Indonesia's urban liberal class often hesitates to criticize female dynastic politicians for fear of appearing misogynistic or anti-progressive. This hesitation benefits entrenched elites enormously. It creates a protective moral shield around figures who should face the same scrutiny as any male power broker.

Meanwhile, younger Indonesians increasingly inherit a democracy where elections remain vibrant but accountability remains elusive. Political competition revolves around personalities and bloodlines rather than institutional reform. Social media amplifies emotional branding while obscuring structural

continuity. Dynasties become influencers with bureaucratic authority.

The republic risks evolving into something resembling democratic feudalism: modern elections legitimizing hereditary networks. President Joko Widodo's own political orbit reflects elements of this trend. His family's growing political presence demonstrates how quickly anti-elite populism can transform into dynastic normalization. Indonesian democracy has a remarkable ability to absorb reformist figures and convert them into participants within the same oligarchic ecosystem they once symbolically challenged.

The system rewards continuity, not disruption. And continuity increasingly wears a maternal smile. None of this means Indonesian women are incapable of transformative leadership. Far from it. Indonesia possesses a vibrant history of female activism, labour organizing, legal advocacy and democratic resistance. Women played crucial roles in opposing dictatorship and defending civil liberties. Many female politicians genuinely seek reform within a difficult system.

But the current celebration of dynastic female leadership often confuses symbolism with substance. A woman occupying office is not automatically a femi-

nist victory. A daughter inheriting power is not necessarily democratic progress. Sometimes it is merely succession planning.

Indonesia's ruling networks learned an important lesson after Suharto fell: overt militarism frightens voters, but maternal authority comforts them. The old authoritarian masculinity of the New Order became politically toxic. So the elite adapted. It discovered that soft imagery could preserve hard structures more effectively than open repression ever could.

The generals receded from television screens. The oligarchs became less visible. The language shifted toward democracy, religion and family. Women emerged as indispensable public faces of this transition because they could humanize systems that otherwise appeared predatory.

It was not the abandonment of elite power. It was elite power learning better manners. Indonesia remains one of the world's most fascinating democracies precisely because its contradictions are so visible. It is democratic yet oligarchic, pluralistic yet increasingly conservative, modern yet dynastic. Its female political ascendancy reflects all of these tensions at once.

The tragedy is not that Indonesia embraced female leadership. The tragedy is that so much of this leadership has been absorbed into preserving the very structures that democracy was supposed to dismantle.

The maternal dynasty has become the perfect emblem of Indonesia's political age: gentle in appearance, ruthless in function, and endlessly effective at convincing the public that continuity is the same thing as change.

The halal oligarchy

Indonesia likes to present itself as the smiling face of democratic Islam: tolerant, pluralistic, moderate. Foreign diplomats adore the script. Investors repeat it at conferences in Jakarta hotels where the coffee is artisanal and the women wear fashionable hijabs that reassure everyone modernity and conservatism can coexist peacefully.

But drive several hours outside the capital, into districts of West Sumatra, South Sulawesi or Banten and another Indonesia emerges. It is an Indonesia where local strongmen discovered that religion is not merely a moral framework or a cultural identity. It is a business model.

The rise of *perda syariah*, sharia-inspired local bylaws, has often been described as evidence of growing Islamic conservatism. That explanation is comforting because it implies sincerity. It suggests ideological conviction, grassroots piety, perhaps even an authentic democratic demand from Muslim voters.

What it misses is the machinery underneath. In many districts, these bylaws are less about Islam than about power. They are instruments for rent extraction, social control and political consolidation. Behind the moral rhetoric sits a remarkably familiar coalition: retired military men, local political dynasties, police brokers, religious entrepreneurs and businessmen who understand that controlling "vice" can become one of the most profitable industries in town.

The genius of the system is that it cloaks ordinary corruption in sacred language. Once a racket wears religious clothing, criticism becomes dangerous.

A district head does not say he wants to monopolize nightlife permits. He says he wants to defend Islamic morality. A local police commander does not say he wants informal payments from karaoke bars. He says he is preserving public order. A militia group

extorting small businesses does not describe itself as organized muscle. It becomes a guardian of the ummah.

The transformation is almost alchemical. Petty authoritarianism becomes virtue. Consider how these bylaws often operate in practice. Alcohol restrictions create black markets. Brothel crackdowns do not eliminate prostitution; they merely shift it into hidden networks controlled by intermediaries connected to local officials. Curfews for women increase opportunities for harassment and bribery by morality patrols. Licensing requirements for "Islamic compliance" create new bureaucratic toll booths where permits mysteriously move faster after unofficial payments.

Every prohibition generates a gatekeeper. Every gatekeeper discovers income. This is why the debate over *perda syariah* frequently misses the point. Analysts argue over theology while local elites count revenue streams.

The irony is almost painful. Indonesia decentralized power after the fall of Suharto partly to weaken authoritarian concentration. Instead, decentralization sometimes created hundreds of mini-authoritarian systems at the district level. Jakarta lost control, but

ordinary citizens did not necessarily gain freedom. In many places, they simply inherited smaller kings.

And these kings quickly learned the political utility of Islamic identity politics. The formula is brutally effective. First, identify a moral panic: alcohol, unmarried couples, LGBTQ communities, women out late at night, Western influence. Then frame yourself as the defender of local Islamic values against urban decadence. Next, empower enforcement networks — police units, vigilante groups, licensing boards, clerical councils. Finally, allow these actors to extract rents from the very activities being condemned.

It is prohibition as patronage. What makes the system especially resilient is that it satisfies multiple interests simultaneously. Local politicians gain legitimacy among conservative voters. Religious organizations gain influence and funding. Security forces gain unofficial income. Business elites eliminate competitors through selective enforcement.

And ordinary citizens, struggling with economic insecurity, are offered a comforting explanation for social decline: moral corruption rather than governance failure. The politics of virtue becomes a substitute for actual development.

Roads remain broken. Schools remain underfunded. Youth unemployment remains stubbornly high. But officials can point proudly to anti-vice raids and mandatory Quran-reading programs as proof of leadership.

Moral theater replaces competent administration. One sees this pattern repeatedly across Indonesia's districts. Areas with weak economic performance often compensate through increasingly aggressive public religiosity. The stricter the moral campaigns become, the more one should ask what problems leaders are trying not to discuss.

Because it is easier to police women's clothing than to build industrial policy. It is easier to raid a nightclub than confront entrenched corruption. It is easier to sermonize about morality than explain why public services remain dysfunctional despite decades of decentralization funds.

And crucially, Islamic identity politics offers something that old-fashioned authoritarian nationalism no longer can: emotional intimacy. People may distrust politicians, but they trust religion. Blend the two together and criticism begins to feel sacrilegious.

That emotional shield is enormously valuable for local oligarchs. Indonesia's democratic transition weakened the old centralized order, but it did not destroy oligarchic power. It merely localized it. Former military officers reinvented themselves as district executives. Political families adapted effortlessly to electoral democracy. Businessmen financed campaigns in exchange for access. The methods changed; the networks survived.

Religion simply became the newest language of legitimacy. In some districts, the relationship between hard-line organizations and local authorities resembles a franchising arrangement. Vigilante groups conduct raids on bars or entertainment venues. Police appear selectively. Businesses pay protection money to avoid disruption. Officials publicly praise morality campaigns while privately benefiting from the informal economy surrounding them.

Everyone understands the choreography. The public performance matters more than actual enforcement consistency. Indeed, selective enforcement is the entire point. If the laws were applied uniformly, the racket would collapse. Flexibility creates opportunity. A nightclub connected to powerful patrons survives while smaller competitors disappear. An en-

tertainment venue pays enough “coordination fees” and suddenly morality concerns become negotiable.

Piety, it turns out, has a market price. Women bear a particularly heavy burden under this system because they become visible symbols in broader political struggles. Dress codes, curfews and morality regulations allow male elites to perform religious authenticity in highly theatrical ways. Female mobility becomes a stage upon which political masculinity is demonstrated.

The obsession is revealing. A district incapable of delivering clean water can still claim success by policing skirt lengths. A politician accused of corruption can rehabilitate himself by championing anti-vice campaigns.

A bureaucracy unable to regulate environmental destruction suddenly becomes highly efficient when monitoring unmarried couples in cheap hotels.

This is not accidental hypocrisy. It is structural logic. Morality politics flourishes precisely because it distracts from governance failure while expanding opportunities for informal control.

The saddest part is that many ordinary Indone-

sians genuinely support aspects of these bylaws. Not because they crave authoritarianism, but because communities facing rapid social change often seek stability in familiar identities. Religion offers certainty amid economic anxiety, migration and cultural fragmentation.

Local elites exploit that vulnerability expertly. They understand that people frightened by modernity are often willing to trade freedoms for symbolic order. And once moral legislation becomes normalized, expanding state intrusion becomes easier. Today it is alcohol restrictions. Tomorrow it is surveillance of private behaviour. The line between communal values and coercive governance grows dangerously thin.

Indonesia is hardly unique here. Across the world, identity politics frequently masks economic interests. Nationalism, sectarianism and religious conservatism all provide useful emotional packaging for elite competition. But Indonesia's district-level politics reveals the process in unusually naked form because decentralization fragmented authority so thoroughly.

One can practically watch mini-oligarchies constructing themselves in real time. And yet the international conversation about Indonesia often remains

oddly sentimental. Western observers see large Muslim populations participating in elections and conclude the democratic project is succeeding beautifully. Technically, elections occur. Voters participate enthusiastically. Civil society exists.

But democracy is not merely voting. It is also the distribution of coercive power. When local strongmen can mobilize religious legitimacy to regulate personal behaviour, intimidate critics and extract informal rents, democracy starts becoming decorative. Elections determine which faction controls the machinery, not whether the machinery itself respects liberal freedoms.

This creates a profound dilemma for Indonesia's future. The country wants to be simultaneously democratic, decentralized and religiously conservative. Perhaps that balance is theoretically possible. But it becomes far harder when local political economies depend financially on moral policing.

Once livelihoods emerge around enforcement, reform threatens vested interests. Thousands of people benefit materially from the current arrangement: bureaucrats, vigilante groups, police officers, local politicians, clerical networks. They may speak the language of piety, but institutions ultimately defend

incentives. And the incentive structure rewards continued moral panic.

There will always be another threat to Islam conveniently requiring new enforcement powers. Another vice requiring regulation. Another enemy corrupting the nation's youth. Another justification for expanding discretionary authority. The cycle feeds itself.

Meanwhile, Indonesia's truly existential challenges receive comparatively less political energy. Climate vulnerability, educational inequality, urban congestion, declining institutional trust, youth underemployment, these problems are harder to dramatize than nightclub raids. They demand technocratic competence rather than symbolic confrontation.

And competence is politically risky because it produces measurable outcomes. Moral campaigns are safer because success is impossible to quantify. One can always claim society remains insufficiently virtuous.

That ambiguity protects politicians. The deeper tragedy is that Islam itself becomes instrumentalized in the process. A faith rich in ethical and intellectual traditions is reduced to bureaucratic policing and

populist theater. Religious identity becomes transactional rather than spiritual, useful mainly as a mechanism for organizing obedience and distributing patronage.

Many Indonesian Muslims recognize this distortion perfectly well. Some of the strongest critics of *perda syariah* are themselves Islamic scholars, activists and organizations who understand that coerced morality often degrades religion rather than strengthens it. They know faith loses moral authority when fused too tightly with petty political interests.

But opposing these systems is difficult because the accusation arrives immediately: anti-Islam, anti-local culture, pro-Western decadence. That is the brilliance of identity politics everywhere. It transforms political disagreement into moral betrayal. And so the halal oligarchy persists.

Not because Indonesia is uniquely intolerant. Not because ordinary citizens are irrational. Not because Islam inevitably produces authoritarianism. Those explanations are lazy.

It persists because decentralized power without strong institutional accountability creates fertile ground for local predation. Religion simply provides

the most effective language available for legitimizing it.

In the end, the question Indonesia faces is not whether it will remain Muslim. That was never in doubt. The real question is whether Islam at the district level will serve citizens or whether citizens will continue serving a political economy built around manufactured virtue and monetized fear. Right now, too often, the answer is painfully obvious.

The court that ate Reformasi

In Indonesia, coups no longer arrive in tanks. They arrive in robes. The most consequential political actor in Jakarta today may not be the president, Parliament or even the oligarchs who bankroll both. It may instead be the Constitutional Court, a body born from the democratic trauma of Suharto's collapse and designed to prevent the return of personalized authoritarian rule. The irony is becoming impossible to ignore: The institution created to guard Reformasi is increasingly functioning as the mechanism through which Reformasi is quietly dismantled.

Not abolished. Not openly repudiated. Just slowly reinterpreted until its protections become decorative. This is the genius of modern democratic regression. The strongman no longer needs to suspend the constitution. He merely needs judges willing to reinterpret it.

Indonesia's Constitutional Court was once hailed as the crown jewel of post-Suharto reform. Established after the 1998 democratic transition, it carried a near-sacred mandate: prevent the return of dynastic rule, military impunity and centralized oligarchic power. The court was supposed to act as a firewall against precisely the kinds of political arrangements that had dominated the New Order era.

Instead, the firewall has become a brokerage house. Case after case reveals the same pattern. Rules once understood as safeguards against concentrated power are being converted into flexible instruments benefiting political families, entrenched elites and networks linked to the old security establishment. The court does not destroy democratic norms directly. It hollows them out through selective reinterpretation.

And the people doing the hollowing are not outsiders to the system. They are the system. A striking number of influential legal actors orbiting Indonesia's

constitutional machinery emerged from overlapping worlds: Suharto-era judicial culture, military legal institutions, bureaucratic patronage networks and elite political families. Some are retired jurists shaped by the authoritarian decades. Others are connected to the legal corps of the Tentara Nasional Indonesia, or TNI, where obedience to state stability historically outweighed liberal constitutionalism. Their language is procedural. Their worldview is not.

That worldview treats democracy less as a moral principle than as a management problem. One sees this most clearly in the court's treatment of presidential threshold laws. The threshold system, requiring parties or coalitions to meet a high parliamentary benchmark before nominating presidential candidates, has long been defended as a mechanism for stability. In practice, it entrenches cartel politics. It ensures that only candidates acceptable to major oligarchic coalitions can realistically compete.

The Constitutional Court had multiple opportunities to dismantle or weaken this barrier. Critics argued that the thresholds violated democratic participation and artificially narrowed political competition. Yet the court repeatedly upheld the system,

effectively preserving a gatekeeping mechanism that favors established dynasties and elite bargaining.

This was not judicial restraint. It was judicial engineering. Indonesia's democratic architecture already suffers from a suffocating concentration of wealth and party control. By preserving presidential thresholds, the court helped transform elections into negotiations among oligarchic factions rather than contests of public vision. Citizens may vote, but viable candidates increasingly emerge from pre-approved elite circles.

The result is democracy without genuine circulation of power. Then came the regional election age-limit controversy — perhaps the clearest example yet of constitutional flexibility serving dynastic ambition.

When the court altered the interpretation of candidacy age requirements in a way that benefited the president's son, the ruling was formally technical but politically explosive. Critics immediately recognized the deeper message: constitutional interpretation in Indonesia had become elastic when elite family interests were involved.

The issue was never merely about age. It was about whether rules remain rules when power is at stake. The court's defenders insisted the ruling fell within legitimate judicial discretion. That argument misses the point entirely. Democratic erosion today rarely happens through obviously illegal acts. It happens through technically defensible decisions that consistently move in one direction: toward concentration of power, toward dynastic continuity and toward normalization of elite privilege.

One ruling can be explained away. A pattern cannot. And the pattern is unmistakable. Indonesia's judiciary increasingly behaves not as an independent constitutional guardian but as a mediator among competing elite interests. The court smooths transitions. It resolves tensions within the ruling establishment. It manages succession disputes. In doing so, it has drifted from constitutional referee to political broker.

The old New Order mentality survives not because Suharto's system returned in identical form, but because its underlying assumptions were never fully dismantled. Stability over accountability. Harmony over opposition. State continuity over democratic disruption. Elite consensus over public contestation.

The military's shadow remains especially important here. Indonesia's democratic transition never fully removed the armed forces from political life. Reformasi weakened formal military dominance, but the institutional culture persisted through informal networks, retired officers, business alliances and legal influence. The TNI no longer governs openly. It governs atmospherically.

Its worldview still shapes elite thinking. Military-affiliated legal figures often frame constitutional issues through the lens of order and national cohesion. That sounds harmless until one realizes how elastic those concepts become in practice. Anti-corruption measures can be portrayed as destabilizing. Restrictions on dynastic politics can be treated as impractical. Civilian oversight can be reframed as inefficiency.

In this framework, democracy becomes acceptable only when it behaves predictably. This helps explain another revealing area of jurisprudence: military pensioner rights and associated legal protections. On the surface, such cases appear administrative. But they also reveal how deeply embedded military institutional interests remain within Indonesia's constitutional ecosystem.

The court's tendency to defer to military-adjacent concerns reflects more than respect for veterans. It reflects a broader reluctance to confront entrenched state-security networks whose political influence survived the democratic transition. Reformasi formally separated military and civilian authority, yet judicial culture often continues treating the armed forces as a uniquely protected institution.

That protection matters politically. Because once courts internalize the belief that certain institutions are too important to disrupt, constitutional neutrality becomes impossible. Some actors gain implicit immunity from aggressive scrutiny while others remain fully exposed to legal enforcement. The law still exists. It simply bends differently depending on who stands before it.

This is how oligarchic democracies function. Not through abolition of institutions, but through unequal elasticity. Indonesia is hardly alone in this phenomenon. Around the world, courts increasingly serve as instruments through which democratic backsliding acquires legal legitimacy. Hungary did it. Turkey did it. The Philippines flirted with it. Even established democracies now struggle against politicized constitutional interpretation.

But Indonesia's case carries particular tragedy because Reformasi once represented one of the most hopeful democratic transitions in Asia. After decades of authoritarianism, Indonesians built institutions specifically designed to prevent dynastic concentration and military domination. Constitutional amendments decentralized power. Civil society flourished. Press freedoms expanded. Direct elections transformed political participation. The Constitutional Court itself symbolized a break from the old order.

Now the old order is returning not through dictatorship, but through adaptation. That adaptation is sophisticated. It does not reject democracy outright. Instead, it repurposes democratic institutions to preserve elite continuity. Elections remain competitive enough to appear legitimate. Courts maintain procedural language. Political parties continue functioning. Yet substantive accountability weakens year after year.

The public senses this transformation even when legal elites deny it. Ordinary Indonesians increasingly view politics as an insider game dominated by connected families, wealthy businessmen and retired power brokers whose influence transcends elections.

Cynicism grows because outcomes appear negotiated long before voters participate. The perception may not always be fully accurate, but perceptions themselves shape democratic legitimacy.

And legitimacy, once lost, is extraordinarily difficult to recover. The danger is not imminent dictatorship. Indonesia is not about to become North Korea. The greater danger is something quieter and potentially more durable: managed democracy. A system where democratic procedures survive but meaningful political disruption becomes nearly impossible.

In managed democracies, courts play a central role. Not because judges are necessarily corrupt in the crude sense. Many genuinely believe they are preserving stability. Some likely view populist disruption as a greater threat than elite consolidation. Others may see compromise with entrenched networks as politically realistic. Constitutional decay often advances through rationalizations rather than conspiracies.

But intentions matter less than outcomes. And the outcome in Indonesia is increasingly clear: anti-dynasty protections weaken, anti-corruption norms soften, military-adjacent influence persists and elite succession becomes easier to engineer.

The Constitutional Court did not create oligarchic politics in Indonesia. Those structures predated Reformasi and survived it. But the court has increasingly normalized them. It has transformed exceptional accommodations into acceptable constitutional practice.

That may prove more consequential than any single election. Because constitutions ultimately depend less on written text than on institutional culture. Once judges internalize the idea that constitutional principles must accommodate elite convenience, every safeguard becomes negotiable.

Age limits become flexible. Thresholds become untouchable. Accountability becomes selective. Eventually, democracy itself becomes conditional. Indonesia's political class often invokes Reformasi as sacred national mythology. Politicians praise democratic transition anniversaries while simultaneously eroding the institutional spirit that made those transitions meaningful. The language of reform survives even as the substance weakens.

This is the final stage of democratic capture: when the guardians of a system begin using its symbols to legitimize its undoing. The Constitutional Court still speaks the language of constitutionalism. That

is precisely why its transformation matters so much. Courts confer legitimacy in ways presidents cannot. When executives consolidate power, citizens may protest. When judges constitutionalize consolidation, resistance becomes harder. Power acquires procedural sanctification.

And once oligarchic arrangements become constitutionally normalized, reversing them becomes extraordinarily difficult without major political rupture. Indonesia's democratic future may therefore hinge less on elections than on whether its legal institutions rediscover their original purpose. Reformasi was never supposed to produce perfect governance. It was supposed to prevent the concentration of unchecked power that defined the Suharto era.

But history has a habit of returning through institutions that forget why they were built. Indonesia's Constitutional Court was designed to stand between democracy and the old order. Increasingly, it stands between the old order and anything that might truly threaten it.

The ghost of Dwifungsi

Indonesia likes to tell itself a comforting story about reform. The generals went back to the barracks. Elections replaced decrees. Civil society bloomed. Students who once disappeared into interrogation rooms now march openly in the streets. The authoritarian skeleton of Suharto's New Order, we are told, has been buried beneath the vocabulary of democracy.

But ghosts do not vanish simply because constitutions change. In Papua and Aceh, the old doctrine of *dwifungsi,* the military's "dual function" as both security force and political manager, never truly died. It merely changed clothes. Today it wears civilian jack-

ets, NGO logos, Islamic nationalist slogans and the polished legal language of democratic governance. The rifles are less visible. The intimidation is more bureaucratic. Yet the objective remains hauntingly familiar: to preserve Jakarta's political order by narrowing the boundaries of dissent.

The tragedy is not simply that Indonesia failed to fully dismantle its authoritarian habits after Reformasi. The deeper tragedy is that it learned how to make those habits look democratic.

Under Suharto, the military openly claimed a right to intervene in political life. Officers sat in parliament. Intelligence units monitored campuses. Civil society organizations were infiltrated or crushed. The state spoke in the blunt grammar of anti-communism and national stability.

Post-Reformasi Indonesia supposedly rejected this framework. The military formally withdrew from parliament. Civilian institutions expanded. Decentralization became the language of reconciliation after the violence and separatist conflicts that nearly tore the archipelago apart in the late 1990s.

Yet what emerged was not a clean democratic break. It was a mutation. Former military elites and secu-

rity networks adapted faster than many democracy activists anticipated. Instead of controlling politics directly, they cultivated influence indirectly, through oligarchic alliances, proxy organizations, religious mobilization and legal engineering. The result is a softer, more flexible version of *dwifungsi*: less visible than tanks in the streets, but often just as effective at policing political thought.

Papua reveals this transformation with painful clarity. The criminalization of Papuan activists today rarely arrives under explicit military decrees. Instead, it comes through democratic legal codes drafted and passed by legislators with deep military or security ties. Activists are accused not of armed rebellion, but of spreading "hate speech," violating electronic information laws, provoking unrest or threatening national unity. The courtroom replaces the detention bunker. The prosecutor replaces the intelligence officer. Internationally, this looks cleaner. Domestically, it feels terrifyingly familiar.

The brilliance of modern authoritarianism is not that it abolishes democracy. It is that it colonizes democratic mechanisms themselves. A Papuan student raising the Morning Star flag can now be prosecuted through laws ostensibly designed to protect

social harmony or combat disinformation. The language sounds universal and liberal. Who could oppose stability? Who could support online hate? But in practice, these laws often function as elastic instruments of political discipline. Their ambiguity is the point.

Once a state can define criticism as provocation and identity-based grievance as extremism, almost any dissident becomes prosecutable. This is where the ghost of *dwifungsi* becomes most visible. The military no longer needs to openly govern if civilian institutions voluntarily internalize security logic. Parliamentarians with military backgrounds help shape legislation. Police forces absorb counterinsurgency mentalities. Nationalist NGOs amplify accusations of separatism. Media pundits frame Papuan activism as a threat to sovereignty rather than an expression of democratic participation.

Everyone performs their assigned role in the theater of managed democracy. The irony is thick enough to choke on. Indonesia celebrates itself internationally as one of the Muslim world's democratic success stories while simultaneously treating Papuan political expression as a security infection. Western governments praise Jakarta's democratic transition even

as Papuan activists are surveilled, detained and publicly stigmatized for peaceful organizing.

Aceh offers a parallel story, though one wrapped in different symbols. After the 2005 Helsinki peace agreement, Aceh became the showcase for conflict resolution. Former rebels entered politics. Special autonomy arrangements were hailed as proof that democracy could heal separatist wounds. And to some extent, violence undeniably declined.

But peace did not eliminate the security mentality. It redistributed it. Former military figures, local political strongmen and oligarchic interests learned to coexist within a controlled democratic environment where dissent remains carefully managed. Islamist organizations with hardline nationalist positions often function as informal enforcers of ideological conformity. Anti-separatism rhetoric blends seamlessly with religious populism. Militia-style groups, some financed by political patrons and business networks, operate in the gray zone between civic activism and intimidation.

The state no longer monopolizes coercion. It outsources parts of it. This is a crucial evolution of *dwifungsi*. During the New Order era, repression was centralized and hierarchical. Today it is fragmented

and semi-privatized. Civilian fronts can harass activists while preserving plausible deniability for the state. Nationalist organizations can frame human rights advocacy as foreign interference. Influencers and media allies can destroy reputations online before police ever intervene.

Authoritarianism has entered the age of subcontracting. And because these actors operate under the banner of democracy, religion or patriotism, criticizing them becomes politically hazardous. Anyone challenging anti-separatist groups risks being labelled anti-national. Anyone defending Papuan self-determination is accused of sympathizing with extremism. The debate is rigged before it even begins.

Indonesia's political class often insists that Papua is uniquely sensitive because separatist violence exists there. This is true, but incomplete. Armed insurgency in Papua is real. Security concerns are not fictional. The problem is that legitimate security concerns have become the permanent justification for treating all forms of Papuan political expression as suspect.

The distinction between violent insurgency and peaceful dissent collapses conveniently in practice. That collapse benefits entrenched elites. Security

instability justifies military budgets, intelligence expansion and political centralization. It sustains nationalist narratives useful during elections. It protects business interests tied to resource extraction in Papua's mineral-rich territories. Chaos, paradoxically, can become politically profitable.

This is why democratic language matters so much in the new version of *dwifungsi*. Open authoritarianism creates international backlash. Legalistic repression creates confusion. When activists are jailed under electronic information laws or public order statutes, governments can claim procedural legitimacy. "They broke the law," officials insist, as though law itself were neutral.

But laws are never neutral in systems shaped by unequal power. A democratic parliament can absolutely produce authoritarian outcomes. Elections alone do not guarantee freedom. In fact, modern illiberalism often thrives through electoral legitimacy. The ballot box can coexist comfortably with political intimidation, media manipulation and selective criminalization.

Indonesia is hardly alone in this phenomenon. Around the world, governments increasingly weaponize democratic institutions against dissent. But In-

donesia's case is especially striking because its democratic transition was once celebrated as a model for the post-authoritarian world.

The danger today is not a dramatic return to Suharto-style dictatorship. The danger is subtler: the normalization of security-state thinking inside democratic culture itself.

Young Indonesians who never experienced the New Order firsthand are growing up in an environment where aggressive nationalism is digitally amplified, where criticism of state policy is frequently framed as betrayal and where militarized language quietly saturates civilian politics. They inherit democratic procedures without necessarily inheriting democratic instincts.

That is how ghosts survive. The old *dwifungsi* justified military intervention by claiming that national unity required constant supervision. The new *dwifungsi* reaches the same conclusion through civilian vocabulary. NGOs talk about social cohesion. Legislators talk about stability. Religious groups talk about moral order. Tech laws talk about harmful content. The terminology changes, but the political psychology remains remarkably consistent: dissent is danger-

ous, central authority is sacred and peripheral grievances must be contained before they spread.

Papua becomes the testing ground for this philosophy because it sits at the intersection of race, nationalism, militarization and economic exploitation. Papuans are often discussed within Indonesian political discourse less as citizens with democratic rights than as subjects requiring management.

That paternalism is devastating. It allows Jakarta elites to speak endlessly about development while ignoring the deeper political demand beneath Papuan unrest: dignity. Roads, infrastructure and welfare programs cannot substitute for meaningful democratic space. Economic investment cannot erase memories of military abuses, displacement or racial discrimination. A government can build highways and still suffocate political voice.

Indeed, authoritarian systems often become highly competent at material development precisely because development can be used to delegitimize dissent. Critics are portrayed as obstacles to progress. Human rights concerns become secondary to modernization narratives.

But people do not risk imprisonment merely because they lack infrastructure. They risk it because they feel unheard. Aceh, meanwhile, demonstrates another lesson: even negotiated peace can reproduce oligarchic authoritarianism if democratic institutions remain shallow. Former rebels become local elites. Security actors retain influence behind the scenes. Patronage networks adapt instead of disappearing. Elections occur regularly, but political competition narrows around entrenched power blocs.

Democracy without accountability easily becomes choreography. Indonesia still possesses vibrant activists, courageous journalists and genuine democratic energy. That should not be underestimated. The country is not doomed to authoritarian restoration. But neither should observers romanticize its democratic trajectory.

The global tendency to praise Indonesia as a democratic success story sometimes produces intellectual laziness. Western governments especially prefer stable narratives. Indonesia is large, strategically important and economically attractive. It is easier to celebrate its elections than to confront the contradictions embedded within its security politics.

Yet democracies are not measured solely by whether people vote. They are measured by how states treat unpopular speech, marginalized identities and politically inconvenient movements.

That is where the ghost of *dwifungsi* still walks. Not in the crude image of soldiers occupying parliament, but in the quieter machinery of democratic repression: laws crafted in the name of harmony, civic groups mobilized in the name of patriotism and political fear disguised as national responsibility.

The uniforms may have faded into civilian attire. The methods may now arrive stamped with parliamentary approval. But for many Papuan activists and for Indonesians increasingly alarmed by shrinking civic space, the underlying message has changed very little.

Know your limits.
Speak carefully.
The state is always listening.

Faith, nickel and power

In eastern Indonesia, the language of salvation is increasingly being spoken through the grammar of extraction.

The advertisements are polished and pious. A smiling farmer in a white skullcap stands before neat rows of oil palms. Young preachers on social media speak of "economic independence for the ummah." Sharia cooperatives promise ethical investment free from the corruption of Western finance. Zakat platforms invite ordinary Muslims to become stakeholders in a righteous national awakening. The message is intoxicating: Indonesia's natural wealth should belong to Muslims, not foreign corporations or Jakarta elites.

But scratch beneath the surface of this Islamic economic renaissance and a darker reality emerges. In

provinces like North Maluku, Central Sulawesi and West Papua, religious financing mechanisms are increasingly intertwined with some of the country's most destructive mining and plantation expansions. Nickel, gold and palm oil projects are being wrapped in the moral legitimacy of Islamic solidarity while oligarchic networks consolidate power over land, labour and political influence.

The result is not Islamic liberation. It is oligarchic capitalism wearing religious perfume. Indonesia has long struggled with the concentration of wealth among politically connected business dynasties. The fall of Suharto was supposed to decentralize power and democratize economic life. Instead, oligarchs adapted beautifully to the post-authoritarian era. They learned to speak the language of reform, nationalism and eventually religion. Today, many of the country's wealthiest political-business alliances no longer present themselves merely as tycoons. They present themselves as guardians of Muslim prosperity.

This evolution matters because religion changes the emotional chemistry of economic power. A mining company can be protested. A project framed as part of Islamic empowerment becomes far more

difficult to criticize without appearing hostile to the community itself.

That is precisely why sharia cooperatives and Islamic crowdfunding platforms have become such effective instruments in eastern Indonesia's resource frontier. They blur the distinction between grassroots participation and elite extraction. Villagers are told they are not merely investors in mining or palm oil projects; they are participants in a civilizational project to strengthen Muslim economic sovereignty.

Who wants to stand against that? The genius of this model lies in how it bypasses traditional scrutiny. Environmental review processes, public hearings and regulatory oversight become politically awkward when projects are embedded within religious narratives. Criticism can be reframed as an attack on local livelihoods, Islamic enterprise or regional development. Activists suddenly find themselves accused not only of obstructing progress but of obstructing the ummah itself.

In North Maluku, where nickel has become central to Indonesia's ambitions in the global electric vehicle supply chain, the rhetoric of Islamic prosperity increasingly accompanies industrial expansion. Investors are encouraged to see participation in resource

extraction as a form of collective uplift. Yet the environmental devastation remains brutally familiar: polluted coastal waters, damaged fisheries, deforestation and communities displaced by industrial corridors designed primarily for export markets.

The same pattern is visible in Central Sulawesi, where massive nickel processing operations have transformed local economies while deepening social inequality. The profits rise vertically. The pollution spreads horizontally.

Workers migrate in, traditional land systems collapse and local elites align themselves with outside capital. Into this turbulence step religious financial actors offering moral reassurance. They promise that unlike secular capitalism, this model is ethical because it is "sharia compliant." But replacing interest rates with Islamic terminology does not automatically create justice. An exploitative project remains exploitative even when wrapped in Arabic vocabulary.

There is a dangerous romanticism in the idea that Islamic finance is inherently more humane than conventional finance. In theory, Islamic economic principles emphasize fairness, shared risk and social welfare. In practice, however, systems are shaped less by theology than by power. If oligarchs dominate the

institutions, the outcomes will reflect oligarchic priorities regardless of religious branding.

Indonesia is not experiencing the Islamization of capitalism. It is experiencing the capitalization of Islam. That distinction is crucial. Religious symbolism has become a shield protecting extractive industries from democratic accountability. Mining firms sponsor mosque renovations. Palm oil conglomerates fund religious schools. Local clerics are invited onto advisory boards or given prominent ceremonial roles. Friday sermons begin echoing the language of economic nationalism tied to resource exploitation. The social ecosystem becomes saturated with subtle incentives not to question the underlying structure.

And many ordinary Indonesians understandably embrace it. After all, these regions have long suffered neglect from Jakarta. Infrastructure is weak. Poverty remains stubborn. Young people need jobs. When companies arrive promising roads, schools, Islamic cooperatives and investment opportunities, resistance becomes difficult, especially when critics often appear to come from distant urban NGOs or foreign environmental organizations.

This is where the rhetoric of "Islamic economic liberation" becomes politically brilliant. It reframes

resource extraction as postcolonial resistance. Nickel mining is no longer merely mining; it becomes national destiny. Palm oil expansion is no longer ecological transformation; it becomes economic emancipation from Western domination.

Any critique can then be dismissed as hypocrisy from foreigners who grew wealthy through their own industrial exploitation.

There is some truth in that argument. Western nations absolutely benefited from centuries of extractive development while now lecturing poorer countries about sustainability. Europe's appetite for "green energy" depends heavily on minerals sourced from places like Indonesia. Electric vehicles in wealthy cities require nickel mined under conditions many consumers would rather not examine too closely.

But acknowledging Western hypocrisy does not absolve local corruption. Too often, the discourse surrounding Indonesia's resource boom treats communities as symbols rather than citizens. Politicians invoke "the people" while decisions are negotiated among elites. Religious cooperatives create the appearance of participatory ownership even when meaningful control remains concentrated among politically connected actors.

The structure resembles modern populism elsewhere in the world: emotional inclusion paired with material centralization.

West Papua reveals the sharpest edge of this contradiction. There, resource extraction intersects not only with environmental degradation but with militarization, indigenous dispossession and long-standing political grievances. Yet even in such a contested landscape, the language of development and religious solidarity is increasingly deployed to justify expansion.

The irony is painful. Indigenous Papuan communities, many of whom are Christian or maintain traditional spiritual systems, often find themselves marginalized within projects framed as part of broader Muslim economic advancement. In this context, religious financing mechanisms do not merely facilitate extraction; they reshape political identity itself.

Economic participation becomes intertwined with demographic and ideological transformation. This should alarm anyone who cares about pluralism in Indonesia. The country's greatest achievement has never been its GDP growth or mineral wealth. It has been its fragile ability to maintain coexistence across immense ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity.

But when resource politics becomes fused with majoritarian religious identity, the social fabric begins to fray.

One does not need to be anti-Islam to recognize the danger of religious institutions becoming deeply entangled with extractive oligarchy. In fact, many Muslim scholars have warned precisely against this fusion of wealth and moral authority. Religion can provide ethical guidance for public life. But once it becomes an instrument of corporate legitimacy, its prophetic voice weakens.

Mosques risk becoming extensions of investor relations departments. Meanwhile, the environmental costs continue mounting. Eastern Indonesia contains some of the most ecologically significant marine and forest systems on Earth. Yet short-term extraction is accelerating with astonishing speed. Rivers are contaminated. Forests disappear. Coastal ecosystems collapse beneath industrial runoff. Entire local economies tied to fishing or small-scale agriculture are destabilized.

And still the advertisements continue promising empowerment. One of the most striking features of this moment is how effectively the language of morality has been privatized. Corporations no longer seek

only legal approval. They seek spiritual endorsement. It is no longer enough for a project to be profitable; it must appear righteous.

That may be the defining political technology of the 21st century: not brute propaganda but ethical branding. Consumers are told their purchases save the planet. Investors are told their portfolios advance justice. Citizens are told extraction represents liberation. The vocabulary changes depending on the audience, but the underlying concentration of power remains remarkably consistent.

Indonesia's Islamic crowdfunding boom did not emerge in a vacuum. It reflects broader anxieties about inequality, globalization and exclusion from national wealth. Millions of Indonesians genuinely feel locked out of economic opportunity. Religious financial networks offer belonging and participation in ways secular institutions often fail to provide.

That emotional need is real. Ignoring it would be foolish. But emotional legitimacy cannot substitute for democratic accountability. A project funded through sharia mechanisms should face the same environmental scrutiny as any other industrial venture. Religious cooperatives should not become parallel

systems operating beyond meaningful public oversight. And Islamic rhetoric should never immunize oligarchic alliances from criticism.

Otherwise Indonesia risks creating a new sacred class of extractive power, one able to claim moral virtue while reproducing many of the same inequalities and ecological destruction associated with conventional capitalism.

The tragedy is that Indonesia possesses the intellectual and spiritual traditions to imagine something better. Islamic ethics contains rich concepts of stewardship, balance and social justice. Indigenous communities across eastern Indonesia have long practiced forms of environmental management rooted in reciprocity rather than endless extraction. Civil society organizations continue fighting for transparency despite enormous pressure.

The country does not lack moral resources. What it lacks is the political courage to separate genuine empowerment from manipulative symbolism.

Because a mining project does not become ethical simply because a cooperative owns shares in it. Palm oil expansion does not become sustainable because

profits are distributed through zakat platforms. And oligarchs do not cease being oligarchs because they quote scripture.

Faith can inspire justice. But it can also anesthetize dissent. That is the uncomfortable truth emerging from eastern Indonesia's resource frontier: The most effective way to protect concentrated power today is not always through force or censorship. Sometimes it is through the promise of collective salvation.

The generals bought the cameras

Indonesia's democracy did not die in a coup. It learned to smile for television. The country that once overthrew a military dictatorship through mass protest now finds itself trapped in a softer, more sophisticated system of control, one where oligarch-owned television networks wrap authoritarian nostalgia in the language of morality, nationalism and religious virtue. Tanks are no longer needed when prime-time news anchors can perform the same function with cleaner suits and better lighting.

The 2019 and 2024 elections revealed something profound about modern Indonesia: political power no longer depends merely on party machinery or military influence. It depends on who owns the na-

tional imagination. And in Indonesia, that imagination is increasingly curated by media conglomerates tied to old New Order elites, former generals, dynastic families and businessmen who learned long ago that information is more valuable than ideology.

Television remains the beating heart of Indonesian political life. Western observers often underestimate this because they project their own media ecosystems onto Southeast Asia. But Indonesia is not a country where newspapers shape national discourse. Television does. In villages, urban kampungs and middle-class living rooms alike, television still carries an aura of authority that social media chaos cannot fully replace. The man on TV is still assumed to know the truth.

That assumption has become one of Indonesian democracy's greatest vulnerabilities. Networks linked to oligarchic interests have mastered the art of manufacturing consent without appearing overtly propagandistic. They rarely scream for dictatorship. They do something subtler and far more effective: They create emotional climates. Fear. Suspicion. Moral panic. Nostalgia. Civilizational anxiety.

The target is almost always reform. Candidates associated with democratic deepening, anti-corrup-

tion initiatives, civilian oversight or pluralist politics are not necessarily attacked directly. Instead, they are placed inside narratives designed to make viewers uncomfortable with change itself. The technique resembles psychological conditioning more than journalism.

A reformist politician supports human rights? The discussion suddenly pivots to social disorder. A student movement criticizes military impunity? Television panels begin debating "national unity." Activists raise concerns about Papuan militarization? The issue becomes separatism and treason. Someone advocates minority protections? Cue panic over LGBT "Westernization."

The formula is simple: associate reform with chaos, and authoritarian nostalgia with stability. What makes the Indonesian version particularly effective is its fusion of military paternalism and conservative Islamic morality. During Suharto's New Order era, the regime relied heavily on anti-communism as its emotional foundation. Today's oligarchic media ecosystem has expanded the formula. Communists remain the eternal ghost, but now they share airtime with sexual minorities, "foreign agents," secular liberals and Papuan activists.

The enemies shift depending on the news cycle. The atmosphere of permanent threat does not. One could call this ideological improvisation. But it is really market-tested authoritarianism. The genius of the system lies in its ability to recycle the aesthetics of democracy while neutralizing democratic substance. Indonesia still has elections. It still has debates. It still has press freedom in the technical sense. But when the dominant media environment is controlled by conglomerates whose business interests depend on political proximity, journalism slowly transforms into narrative management.

And narrative management is always about deciding which emotions deserve amplification. Notice what rarely receives sustained outrage on oligarch-owned television: land inequality, labour exploitation, environmental destruction by politically connected companies or dynastic corruption itself. These issues are dangerous because they direct public anger upward, toward entrenched power.

Moral panic directs anger sideways. The anti-LGBT campaigns that periodically explode across Indonesian television are particularly revealing. Indonesia has no major organized movement demanding same-sex marriage or sweeping queer legal reforms.

Yet television discourse frequently portrays LGBT visibility as an existential national emergency. Why? Because moral panic serves several functions simultaneously.

First, it consolidates conservative audiences around emotionally charged symbolic battles. Second, it frames elite-backed politicians as protectors of traditional values. Third, it distracts from material grievances that might otherwise unite working- and middle-class voters against oligarchic power. And finally, it creates a political atmosphere where dissent itself becomes culturally suspicious. The same applies to anti-communist rhetoric, which in Indonesia functions less as a factual accusation than as a cultural spell. The communist threat is endlessly invoked despite the practical nonexistence of a meaningful communist movement. Yet the specter remains politically useful because it activates historical trauma while legitimizing state authority.

Once a society is conditioned to believe invisible enemies are everywhere, demands for accountability begin to look dangerous. This is where the rehabilitation of New Order figures becomes possible. Indonesia's post-Suharto democratic transition was supposed to reduce the political dominance of mil-

itary-linked elites. Instead, many of them adapted beautifully to electoral capitalism. Former generals and politically connected businessmen reinvented themselves as democratic patriots, media investors and guardians of national stability.

Television played a crucial role in laundering these reputations. The New Order is no longer remembered primarily through censorship, disappearances or massacres. Increasingly, it is remembered through selective nostalgia: cheap food prices, order, discipline, national pride, infrastructure and "unity." The violence is blurred. The repression becomes background noise. Younger Indonesians who never experienced the dictatorship firsthand encounter a sanitized memory package delivered through entertainment culture, political commentary and selectively curated historical narratives.

Authoritarianism survives best when it becomes sentimental. This explains why dynastic politics now feels normal rather than scandalous to many Indonesian voters. Media ecosystems tied to oligarchic interests present political families not as threats to democracy but as symbols of continuity and competence. Political inheritance is reframed as experience.

Elite networking becomes leadership. The children of powerful figures are marketed like celebrity brands.

Viewers are encouraged to trust familiarity over institutional integrity. The result is a democracy increasingly organized around personalities rather than principles. Critics sometimes dismiss this phenomenon as merely "Asian political culture," as if Indonesians are somehow naturally predisposed toward hierarchy and paternalism. This is lazy analysis bordering on intellectual racism. Indonesians fought bitterly against dictatorship. Students died demanding reformasi. Civil society organizations continue to challenge corruption and abuse despite enormous pressure.

The problem is not cultural incapacity for democracy. The problem is that oligarchic systems evolve faster than democratic institutions. Indonesia's media tycoons understand modern politics with chilling clarity. They know most voters are not ideological extremists. They are emotionally exhausted citizens seeking reassurance amid uncertainty. Television does not need to convince audiences to love authoritarianism outright. It merely needs to make democratic reform feel risky, chaotic and culturally alien.

Fear lowers democratic expectations. And once expectations collapse, almost any elite arrangement can be sold as pragmatism. This dynamic became especially visible during the recent election cycles, where candidates associated with establishment continuity benefited from media framing that emphasized stability, patriotism and moral order. Reform-oriented voices often appeared trapped inside defensive positions, constantly forced to deny accusations, clarify intentions or prove their nationalist credentials.

That asymmetry matters enormously. In politics, the side defining the emotional terrain usually wins. If one camp talks about wages, corruption and institutional reform while the other talks about threats to religion, national collapse and social decay, the latter often possesses the emotional advantage, especially during periods of economic anxiety. Television executives understand this instinctively. Outrage keeps audiences engaged. Fear keeps audiences loyal.

And oligarchs prefer frightened citizens to empowered ones. Indonesia is hardly alone in this phenomenon. Across the world, billionaire-owned media increasingly blur the line between journalism and political engineering. But Indonesia offers a particularly striking example because its democratic transition

once inspired genuine optimism. After Suharto's fall, many observers believed the country was becoming proof that Islam, democracy and pluralism could coexist within a rapidly modernizing society.

That possibility still exists. But it is being suffocated by a media order that profits from permanent polarization and managed fear. The tragedy is not simply that television networks favour certain candidates. Media bias exists everywhere. The deeper problem is that the entire structure of political discourse becomes distorted around oligarchic interests. Public debate narrows. Certain assumptions become untouchable. Militarism is romanticized. Minority rights become negotiable. Structural inequality disappears beneath endless culture wars.

Democracy survives procedurally while deteriorating psychologically. Citizens begin censoring themselves before the state even needs to intervene. That is the real achievement of modern oligarchic media systems: They make domination feel voluntary.

Indonesia's democratic future may therefore depend less on elections themselves than on whether alternative information ecosystems can survive long enough to rebuild civic imagination. Independent

journalism, student movements, digital creators and local civil society groups remain crucial counterweights to oligarchic narrative control. But they face enormous disadvantages in resources, reach and institutional access.

Meanwhile, television continues entering millions of homes every night, whispering the same message in different forms:

> Order matters more than freedom.
> Morality matters more than justice.
> Stability matters more than accountability.

And above all, the powerful should remain powerful because only they can protect the nation from the chaos lurking just outside the frame. That message is not uniquely Indonesian. It is the defining language of 21st-century soft authoritarianism. The frightening part is not that people believe it. The frightening part is how normal it has started to sound.

How infrastructure became Indonesia's quiet political language

In Indonesia's recent political imagination, asphalt has become rhetoric. Where once campaigns were fought on ideological lines, nationalism, religion, reform, the Jokowi era elevated something more tangible, more seductive, and far more politically efficient: infrastructure. Roads, ports, railways, airports. The promise was simple enough to fit on a billboard and compelling enough to survive the cynicism of voters who had long stopped believing in grand ideological narratives. Build something visible, and politics becomes measurable. Pour concrete, and legitimacy follows.

But beneath that gleaming surface lies a more complicated transformation, one that critics of Indonesia's development model describe as the quiet conversion of democratic participation into a referendum on construction projects. In this view, citizens are no longer asked what kind of state they want. They are asked whether they want a toll road here or a port there. And once the question is framed that way, the answer almost always feels like "yes."

This is the essence of what might be called infrastructure populism: a governing logic in which legitimacy is continuously renewed not through institutional deepening or civic empowerment, but through the perpetual rollout of visible projects. It is democracy reduced to a construction schedule.

Indonesia's archipelagic geography has always made infrastructure politically charged. Connecting fragmented islands and distant provinces is not just an economic necessity but a symbolic act of nation-building. Under President Joko Widodo, that symbolism became central to governance. Highways cutting through Java, massive port expansions, and ambitious rail projects were not just development initiatives; they were political statements, proof that

the state could finally be felt in places where it had long been absent.

Supporters of this model argue that it corrected decades of underinvestment and elite stagnation. They point out that infrastructure gaps were real, that logistics costs were crippling, and that visible state action restored public confidence in governance.

Yet critics argue that visibility is precisely the problem. When politics becomes synonymous with construction, other questions fade into the background: Who benefits from these projects? Who decides their location? Who controls the contracts? And, perhaps most importantly, what forms of power are being reinforced in the process?

In this interpretation, infrastructure is not politically neutral. It is a distributional mechanism of contracts, land, influence and long-term control.

What began as a national development narrative has, in recent years, been echoed at regional levels with striking consistency. In provinces such as West Kalimantan and Papua, local elites and power brokers have adapted the infrastructure-first model into their own political ecosystems.

Here, critics describe a familiar pattern: election campaigns centered on promises of roads, bridges, and connectivity projects in exchange for local support. Once in office, these promises often translate into procurement networks that bind regional governments to contractors with military backgrounds or entrenched business ties.

It is in these spaces that the line between public development and private accumulation begins to blur. Some analysts argue that the presence of military-linked businesses in construction and logistics sectors has expanded in tandem with the infrastructure boom. Others emphasize that informal networks, often involving local elites, contractors, and land intermediaries, play a decisive role in determining which projects proceed and who profits from them.

The result, critics say, is not simply corruption in the narrow sense, but a structural alignment of political incentives: deliver visible projects quickly, consolidate support, and distribute economic benefits through controlled networks of execution.

Nowhere is this tension more visible than in Papua, where infrastructure development has long been

framed as both economic necessity and political integration strategy.

New roads and highways are presented as pathways to inclusion, linking remote communities to markets, services, and administrative centers. Yet at the same time, some local voices and human rights observers have raised concerns that infrastructure expansion can also function as a mechanism of deeper state penetration into contested territories.

In these accounts, roads are not just conduits of commerce; they are also conduits of surveillance, military mobility, and administrative consolidation. Development and security become intertwined, sometimes indistinguishable.

Critics of this approach argue that democratic participation in such contexts becomes highly constrained. Local communities are often consulted late in the process, if at all, and decisions about land use and project placement are frequently negotiated between central authorities, regional officials, and contractors rather than through genuine participatory mechanisms.

The language of development, in this framing, can obscure as much as it reveals.

Java's extensive toll road network is often cited as the crown jewel of Indonesia's infrastructure push. It is also, symbolically, the clearest expression of infrastructure populism's political logic.

Toll roads are highly visible, easy to inaugurate, and politically creditable. They can be cut with ribbons, named and photographed. Their benefits, reduced travel time, improved logistics, are real and measurable. But their political function extends beyond economics.

They operate as a form of governance currency.

Each completed segment becomes a unit of political legitimacy, convertible into public approval and electoral capital. Campaign promises are thus transformed into physical assets, and political narratives are anchored in material completion rather than institutional reform.

Yet critics caution that this model risks narrowing the democratic imagination. If success is defined primarily through infrastructure delivery, then other forms of governance, judicial independence, bureaucratic accountability, environmental protection, risk becoming secondary concerns.

In this sense, democracy becomes transactional: citizens evaluate the state not by how power is distributed, but by how quickly roads are built.

The more troubling dimension of infrastructure populism, according to its critics, is not simply its focus on construction, but its adaptability to existing power structures.

Indonesia's political economy has long been characterized by networks of business elites, regional power brokers, and institutional actors whose interests overlap in complex ways. Infrastructure expansion, rather than disrupting these networks, has in some cases provided new channels through which they can operate.

Large-scale projects require land acquisition, contracting, logistics coordination, and regulatory approval. Each of these stages creates opportunities for influence and negotiation. In regions where state capacity is uneven, these opportunities multiply.

Some observers argue that this has enabled a kind of hybrid development coalition: part technocratic, part oligarchic, and often reinforced by actors with security-sector backgrounds. Others are more cautious, noting that Indonesia's system remains plural-

istic and that competition among elites prevents any single group from fully capturing the state.

Still, the perception persists that infrastructure has become a site where political influence and economic gain converge more visibly than in previous eras.

At the heart of this debate lies a paradox. Infrastructure populism appears, at first glance, to strengthen democracy by delivering tangible results. Roads are popular. Bridges are celebrated. Airports are politically useful symbols of progress.

Yet the very visibility that makes infrastructure politically effective may also obscure the deeper processes of decision-making behind it.

When democracy is measured primarily through output rather than process, accountability becomes harder to locate. Citizens can see what is built, but not necessarily how it was decided, who benefited from its construction, or what alternatives were excluded in the process.

This creates what some scholars describe as a "consensus of concreteness": broad public approval for development outcomes that may mask narrow patterns of control.

Indonesia's infrastructure transformation is undeniably real. Travel times have decreased. Regional connectivity has improved. Economic corridors have expanded. These achievements are not trivial, and any serious analysis must acknowledge their material impact on millions of lives.

But the political question remains unresolved: what kind of state emerges when legitimacy is built primarily through construction?

An "asphalt state," to borrow a phrase critics sometimes use, is one that is perpetually visible but not always transparent. It is a state that is always building, always inaugurating, always promising the next phase of connectivity. Yet it is also a state whose deeper institutional questions about accountability, equity and participation, risk being overshadowed by the next ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Infrastructure will remain central to Indonesia's development trajectory for decades to come. No serious observer suggests otherwise. The archipelago's geography demands it, and its economic ambitions depend on it.

But the deeper challenge is political, not technical. It is the question of whether democratic life can be

sustained when its most visible expression becomes the completion of physical projects rather than the strengthening of civic institutions.

If campaign promises become toll roads, as the saying goes, then the danger is not that the roads are built but that politics itself begins to end at the roadside.

Indonesia, the plastic democracy

Wiryo Huojin

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INDONESIA THE PLASTIC DEMOCRACY

Wiryo Huojin, a dedicated 60-year-old high school teacher in Yogyakarta, has spent nearly four decades inspiring students with his profound passion for Indonesian history and literature. Known for his gentle wisdom and extensive collection of vintage books, he seamlessly weaves traditional cultural values into modern lessons to prepare the next generation for a changing world.

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